Chapter 57
I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE A BIG DEAL OUT OF THIS SINCE THINGS GET AWKWARD WHEN MY HUNCHES ARE WRONG...
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Chapter 57 The Late Emperor ②

JUST A LITTLE WALKING'S KICKING UP ALL THIS DUST.
BUT I KNOW THAT MOLD ALONE ISN'T TO BLAME FOR THIS STRANGE ODOR.
AN ASSORT-MENT OF BRUSHES WITH FLAT TIPS...
JUST AS I THOUGHT ...

DID THE LATE EMPEROR TAKE UP PAINTING AS A HOBBY?
...HE PAINTED ME JUST ONCE.
?
JINSHI'S FINGER IS TWITCHING.
HE TOLD ME IT WAS OUR SECRET BECAUSE IT WOULD BE TAKEN AWAY FROM HIM IF ANYONE ELSE FOUND OUT.

HE APPEARS SERENE ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT I THINK HE MUST BE SHAKEN.
IT'S A TIC OF HIS I'VE ONLY RECENTLY NOTICED.
IS THIS WHERE HE PAINTED?
...BUT I NEED MORE INFORMATION IF I'M TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS "CURSE."
...NOR DO I CARE TO KNOW MUCH MORE THAN I ALREADY DO...
I DON'T KNOW ALL THAT MUCH ABOUT THE LATE EMPEROR ...
IF ANYONE KNOWS, IT WOULD BE HIM.
HOWEVER, ONCE THE LATE EMPEROR MADE A HABIT OF COMING HERE, HE WAS ALWAYS ATTENDED BY THE SAME SERVANT.
WE CANNOT SAY.

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WOULD YOU SUMMON HIM AT ONCE?
I SHALL GO FIND HIM, THEN.
I BELIEVE HE WORKS HERE STILL...
MAY I TOUCH THESE BRUSHES?
GO AHEAD.
THE BRISTLES ARE MUCH STIFFER THAN I IMAGINED.
SNIFF SNIFF
AND THEY HAVE THAT DISTINCTIVE SMELL.
THERE ARE PIECES OF SOMETHING RESEMBLING BOILED SWEETS ALL OVER THE FLOOR...
...AND SMEARS WHERE SOMEONE TRIED DESPERATELY TO CLEAN THEM UP.

AND THE MESSY TRAIL LEADS TO...
...THIS WALL.
SHP
IT HAS SPRING, AS IF IT WERE COVERED IN THICK PAPER.
SOMETHING WAS PAINTED ON THE SURFACE TO STRENGTHEN IT.
BEND
?!

I HAVE A ROUGH IDEA OF WHAT THE "CURSE" IS NOW...
...BUT I THINK I MIGHT BE ABLE TO PUZZLE OUT ONE MORE RANDOM THING FROM ALL THIS...
THIS ROOM APPEARS SIMPLE...
...HAS YELLOWED WITH AGE.
...MOST LIKELY BECAUSE ITS ALREADY PLAIN, UNORNAMENTED WALLPAPER...
I'VE BROUGHT HIM.
YOU...

HE'S QUITE OLD.
WAS THIS OLD MAN REALLY ENTRUSTED WITH THE CARE...
...OF SUCH AN IMPORTANT PERSON'S QUARTERS UNTIL JUST A FEW YEARS AGO?
I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME-THING.
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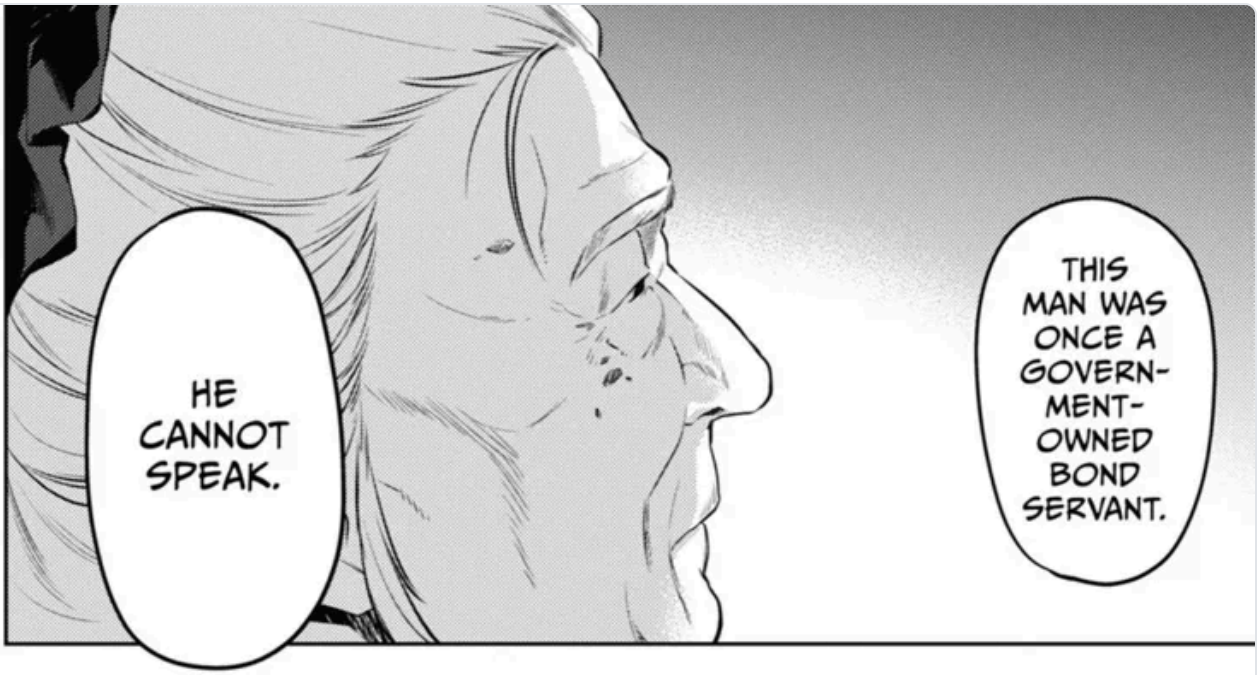
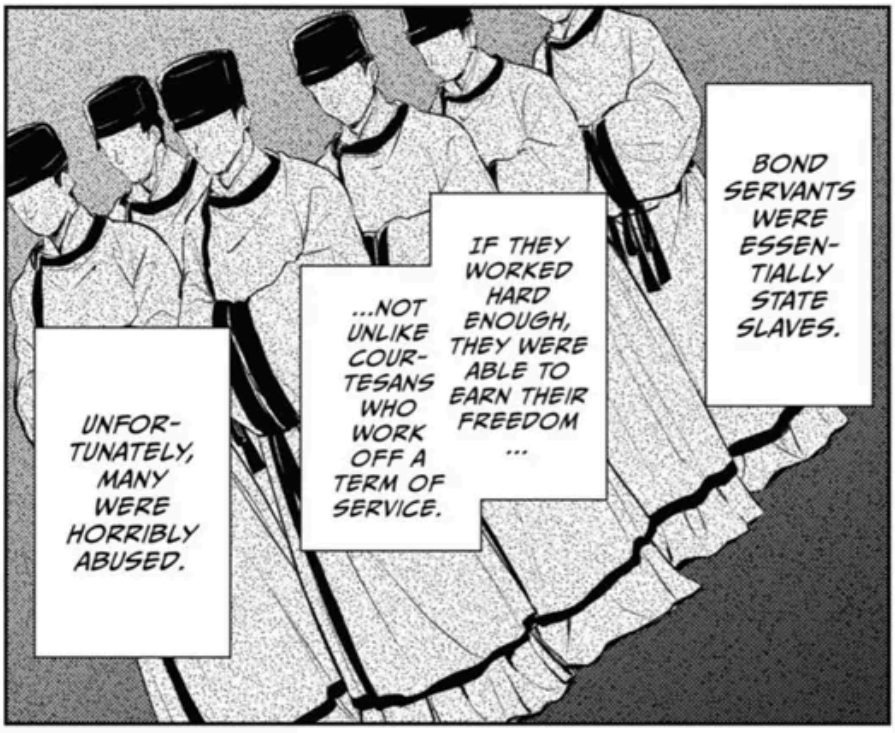
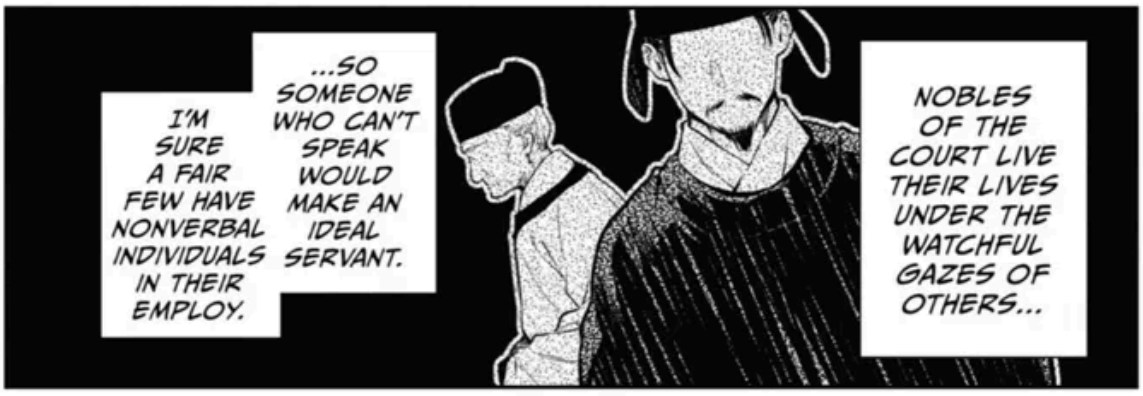

HE CANNOT SPEAK.
THIS MAN WAS ONCE A GOVERN-MENT-OWNED BOND SERVANT.


BOND SERVANTS WERE ESSEN-TIALLY STATE SLAVES.
IF THEY WORKED HARD ENOUGH, THEY WERE ABLE TO EARN THEIR FREEDOM ...
...NOT UNLIKE COUR-TESANS WHO WORK OFF A TERM OF SERVICE.
UNFOR-TUNATELY, MANY WERE HORRIBLY ABUSED.

I SEE.
SO THAT'S HOW IT IS.


I'M SURE A FAIR FEW HAVE NONVERBAL INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR EMPLOY.
...SO SOMEONE WHO CAN'T SPEAK WOULD MAKE AN IDEAL SERVANT.
NOBLES OF THE COURT LIVE THEIR LIVES UNDER THE WATCHFUL GAZES OF OTHERS...

WHEN YOU CLEANED THIS ROOM, DID YOU HAPPEN TO COME ACROSS ANY PAINTINGS?
NO RE-SPONSE.
I THINK SOMETHING HAPPENED HERE.
DOES HE NOT WANT TO TALK TO A YOUNG GIRL LIKE ME?
...NO, THAT'S NOT IT.

GLANCE
HE'S HIDING SOME-THING.
IS THERE SOME-THING IN THE WALL?

MAY I PEEL OFF THIS WALL-PAPER?
!!
TOUCH
TOUCH

...BUT I CAN'T LEAVE THIS ALONE.
THOSE EYES ARE PLEADING WITH ME TO STOP...

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THIS BUILDING IS SOON TO BE DEMOLISHED ANYWAY.
WOULD THAT BE ALL RIGHT?
DO WHAT YOU MUST IF YOU THINK IT WILL HELP US DISCOVER THE TRUTH.
SKRRK
PLAP
PLAP

NO WONDER IT WAS SO PLIANT.
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WHAT IN THE WORLD ...?

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE MATERIALS OR THE TECHNIQUE.
IT'S AS IF THE PAINTING IS APPEALING TO THE VIEWER AND TRYING TO CONVEY SOME HIDDEN MESSAGE.
THIS WORK HAS THE POWER TO MAKE ME FEEL THAT WAY.
I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE LATE EMPEROR'S NATURE.
BUT I THINK HE LIVED AND DIED UNABLE MAKE USE OF HIS TRUE GIFTS...
...JUST TO STAND ATOP THE NATION.

IT REMINDS ME OF THE PAINTING I SAW LAST NIGHT.
THAT'S THE STONE I FOUND IN JINSHI'S WICKER TRUNK.
...THIS PAINTING MUST HAVE ORIGINALLY BEEN A FAR MORE VIBRANT YELLOW.
THOUGH IT HAS DEGRADED FROM BEING COVERED UP WITH WALL-PAPER...
THE PAINT HE USED ...
...COMBINED A PIGMENT WITH A LIQUID.
THIS PARTICULAR PIGMENT IS CALLED ORPIMENT YELLOW.
AS THE NAME WOULD SUGGEST, IT IS MADE BY CRUSHING ORPIMENT STONES.

ORPIMENT IS A MINERAL THAT CONTAINS ARSENIC, AND IT'S JUST AS TOXIC.
AND ARSENIC IS KNOWN TO SLOW DECAY.
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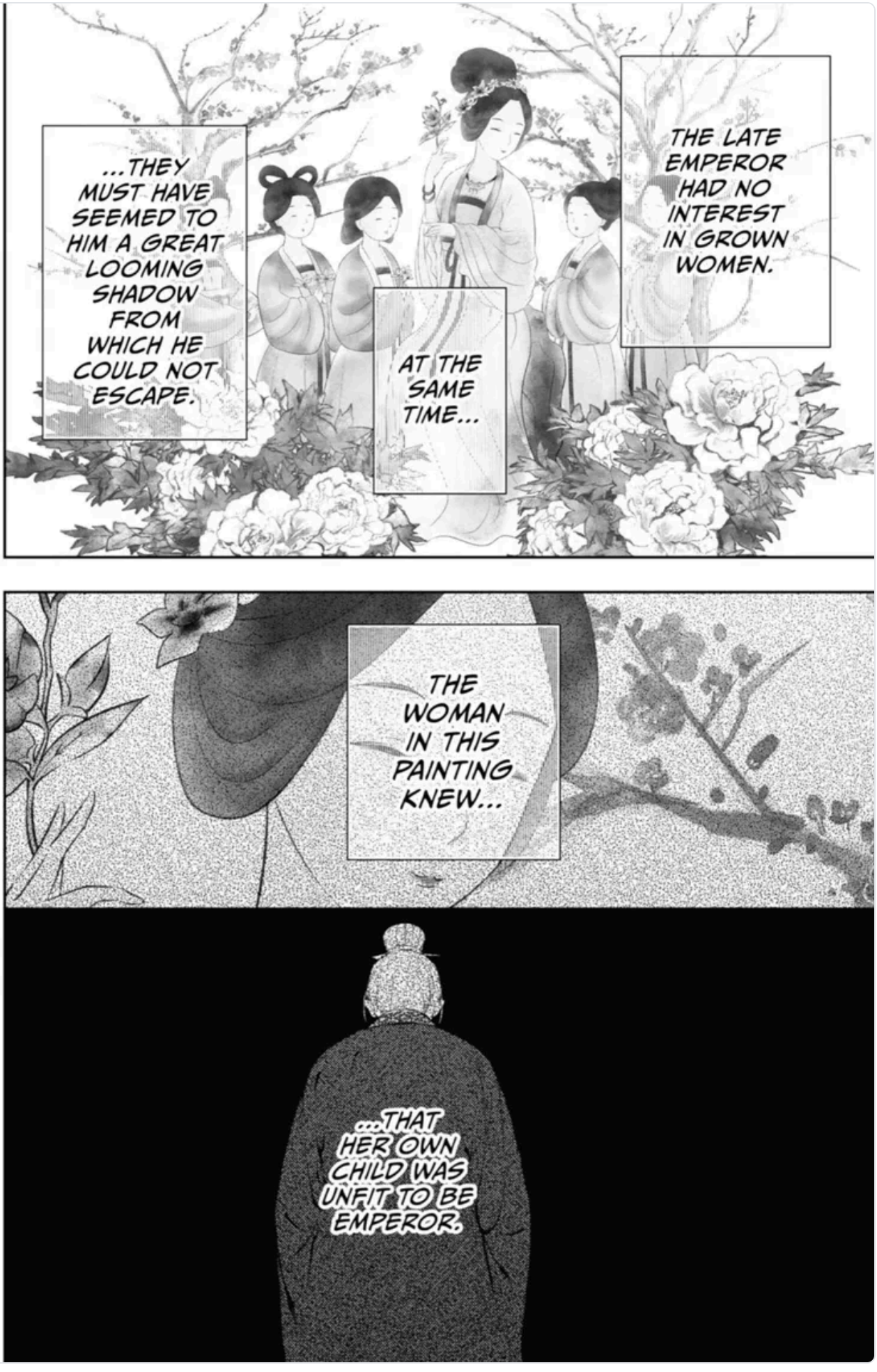
BUT THE FACT THAT A YOUNG JINSHI PICKED UP AN ORPIMENT STONE AT THE INNER COURT...
AT FIRST, I THOUGHT THE LATE EMPEROR MIGHT'VE BEEN UN-WITTINGLY EXPOSED TO ORPIMENT...
...FROM WHERE IT'D BEEN USED TO DECORATE WALLPAPER OR SOME SUCH.
...ALONG WITH THE WARPED TEXTURE OF THE BRUSHES STREWN AROUND THIS ROOM...
...GAVE RISE TO ANOTHER POSSI-BILITY.
BY THE TIME OF HIS PASSING, IT HAD LIKELY CIRCULATED THROUGHOUT HIS BODY.
THE LATE EMPEROR MUST HAVE GRADUALLY ABSORBED THE ARSENIC...
...OVER THE LONG PERIODS OF TIME HE SPENT IN THIS ROOM.

AT BEST, THEY COULD SIMPLY CONFIRM THAT IT WASN'T BEING MIXED INTO HIS FOOD.
...NOR WERE THEY IN A POSITION TO TELL THE EMPEROR WHAT HE COULD AND COULD NOT DO.
BUT THEY HAD NO IDEA HOW HE WAS COMING INTO CONTACT WITH IT...
I'M SURE HIS PHYSICIANS WERE AWARE OF THE POSSIBILITY AS WELL.
...LEAVING THE MUTE SLAVE THE CARETAKER OF THE CHAMBER...
AND SO, THE EMPEROR— THE MOST POWERFUL MAN IN THE LAND— HAVING ALREADY BEEN DUBBED A FOOL...
...TOOK TO PAINTING IN SECRET...
"WHAT KIND OF MAN OF STATURE INDULGES IN SUCH A VULGAR HOBBY?"
AT LEAST THAT'S HOW EVERYONE WOULD'VE SEEN IT, AND HE MUST'VE KNOWN.
THERE MUST BE MORE PAINTINGS BENEATH THIS ONE.
THE WALL STILL YIELDS TO THE TOUCH.
BEND

WHAT I REALLY WANT TO KNOW...
...IS HOW THE LATE EMPEROR ACQUIRED ALL HIS PAINTING IMPLE-MENTS.
THESE CANDY-LIKE FLECKS ALL OVER THE FLOOR...
...ARE PROBABLY RESIN OR GLUE MADE FROM BOILED-DOWN ANIMAL HIDES AND THE LIKE.
SUCH SUBSTANCES IMPROVE THE ADHESION OF PAINT TO PAPER.

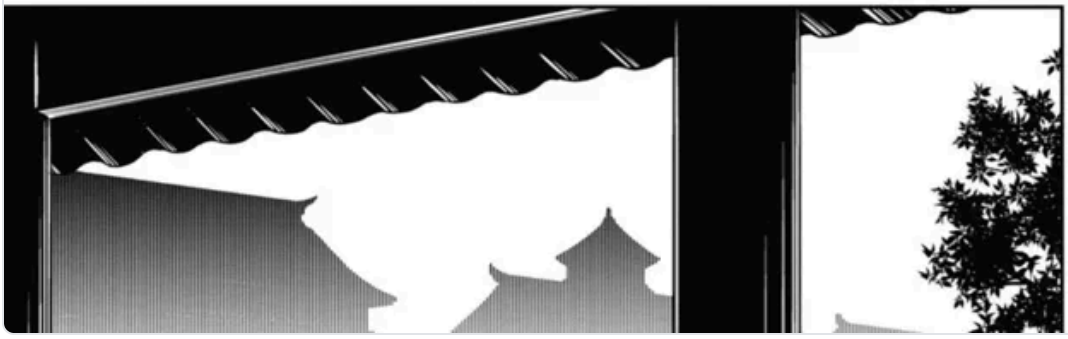
...AS WELL AS MINERALS FOR MAKING PIGMENTS...
...AREN'T ALL TOO EASILY OBTAINABLE.
...RESIN AND PAPER LARGE ENOUGH TO BE USED FOR WALLPAPER...
WHILE PAINT BRUSHES CAN BE MANAGED WITH ANIMAL HAIR...

THAT MEANS ...
...SOMEONE WENT OUT OF THEIR WAY...
...TO SPECIALLY SUPPLY EVERYTHING HE WOULD NEED TO PAINT.


...THEY MUST HAVE SEEMED TO HIM A GREAT LOOMING SHADOW FROM WHICH HE COULD NOT ESCAPE.
AT THE SAME TIME...
THE Llate EMPEROR HAD NO INTEREST IN GROWN WOMEN.
THE WOMAN IN THIS PAINTING KNEW...
...THAT HER OWN CHILD WAS UNFIT TO BE EMPEROR.

THAT'S WHY SHE GATHERED POWER TO HER HAND, BECOMING NIGH AN EMPRESS HERSELF...
HOW IRONIC, THEN...
...THAT THE LAST THING SUCH A FIERCE MOTHER BESTOWED UPON HER BELOVED SON...
...WAS THIS PLACE AND THE TOOLS WITH WHICH TO PAINT.
...AND DID ALL SHE COULD TO PROTECT HER CHILD ON THE THRONE THAT HE'D FALLEN INTO...
...BY SHEER CHANCE.

NEITHER WOULD'VE KNOWN ABOUT THE POISON LURKING WITHIN.
...FROM THE THEN EMPRESS DOWAGER AND GIVE THEM TO THE LATE EMPEROR.
THIS OLD MAN MAY HAVE BEEN THE ONE TO RECEIVE THE MATERIALS...
SHE SEEMS ALMOST TO BE POSING QUESTIONS TO SOMEONE UP THERE BEYOND THE VAST BLUE SKY...

PERHAPS LEARNING THE TRUTH HAS MADE HER SENTI-MENTAL...

AND THAT IS AS MUCH AS I CAN TELL YOU.